



3 Key Questions to Ask After Each Performance

By Tim Brown

This past year I volunteered time at a Christian Camp and Conference Center and attended their weekly staff meetings. One interesting thing I saw concerned their weekend retreats. When the retreat was over, they discussed it using a great approach. The director would ask two questions and each person gave their input. The first question was, “*What went well over the weekend?*” The second was, “*What could have gone better?*”

I realized that this was a great way to help a puppet team improve their performances. What would happen if teams used this approach after every performance? You could start practice time by asking and answering three questions about the previous performance.

Question 1: What went well during our performance?

Go around the team and have each member tell what they thought went well. Focus your attention on the puppetry, the message, the audience response, and the overall impact of the program.

Some of the things might be; specific puppet motions or actions that went over well, the quality of the entrances and exits, and each puppet maintaining good lip synchronization.

You might mention the interaction between a puppet and the emcee during an ad-lib session. Comments could include how well the audience responded to humor in the plays or how the audience seemed to listen closely to the message being shared.

Doing this exercise helps reinforce good puppetry and communication. Each time you repeat this process, it’s a reminder of the importance of good fundamentals. Also, when going through the things that went well, someone might mention a specific puppet motion or ad-lib that worked well. The puppeteer might not have realized what they did, but with the comment that action could become a regular part of the skit.

Another benefit of this process is the encouragement it can bring. Since puppeteers are behind the theater, they can’t see their performance from the audience’s perspective. Comments about what went well that are related to the actual puppet performance can be a big encouragement to puppeteers.

Question 2: What could have gone better in this performance?

Notice the wording of the question. It wasn’t “*What went wrong in this performance?*” When you ask the question that way, you can easily develop a list, but it isn’t always helpful. The focus is on the negative, what went wrong, not the positive, how to improve it. When you ask what could have gone better, it gets the team thinking about solutions, not problems.

For instance, let's say that a puppet missed his entrance and first line. It's easy to pass blame and tell that puppeteer not to do it again and then go to the next point. Instead, focus your attention on why the person missed their line.

Maybe there were other puppeteers in the way of that person getting to their spot. Maybe another puppeteer was trying to give them last minute instructions or was talking to them and got them sidetracked. Maybe the play hadn't been practiced enough and the person didn't realize it was time for them to come in.

If you take a bit of extra time to find the "why" behind things that don't go well, you are much more likely to improve them. The key is to focus attention on how to fix the problem and not on who is to blame.

When talking about what could have gone better, be careful that you don't accuse someone of poor puppetry. *"Sam, your puppet was so low that all the audience could see was the top of its head. You know better than that."* If you say something like that to a puppeteer it's just going to raise their defenses and hinder learning from taking place.

"Sam, your lip sync was good during the play, but your performance could have been better if your puppet was higher. Since the audience is below the stage level, looking up, they could only see the puppet's forehead."

Wording it that way shows the puppeteer that you aren't accusing him of bad puppetry but that you want to help him improve. It also is a reminder that the audience will benefit by making one simple correction.

Question 3: As a result of our answers, what is something specific we can do that will help improve our next performance?

Sometimes when you list what went well and what could have gone better you move on to next agenda item and forget about your answers. That's not real helpful. The goal of the debriefing is to find ways to improve your performances and uncover weaknesses you may not have seen.

This third question causes your team to think of something specific you can do to improve. A huge benefit is that the team discovers the weakness which has a greater impact than the director telling them about it. When the team discovers something, the team will be more interested in correcting it.

You may come up with several ideas and if you do it's a good idea to prioritize the list. Choose one thing to start working on immediately and add the others as they fit. If you try to work on too many at once it won't be as effective.

At the camp, the debriefing time was a valuable tool to improve future retreats. Try adding debriefing sessions to your puppet experience. Maybe you'll discover that they are a great tool to strength your team and ministry.